NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5750 APRIL 21, 1978
LASZLO DOSA

SMALLPOX ON THE WAY OUT

ANNCR:

THE WORLD'S LAST KNOWN CASE OF SMALLPOX WAS DETECTED SIX MONTHS AGO. AND IF NO OTHER CASES ARE FOUND FOR THE NEXT EIGHTEEN MONTHS, THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION WILL BE ABLE TO DECLARE THAT SMALLPOX HAS BEEN COMPLETELY ERADICATED. VOA SCIENCE EDITOR LASZLO DOSA PREPARED THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE :

SMALLPOX HAS BEEN KILLING AND MAIMING COUNTLESS MILLIONS OF PEOPLE FOR THE LAST THREE-THOUSAND YEARS. ELEVEN YEARS AGO, THE UNITED NATIONS WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION LAUNCHED A MASSIVE PROGRAM TO WIPE OUT SMALLPOX FROM THE FACE OF THE EARTH. THAT PROGRAM IS SOON TO END BECAUSE SMALLPOX IS ABOUT TO BECOME PAST HISTORY.

CAUSED BY A VIRUS, SMALLPOX CAN BE TRANSMITTED ONLY BY HUMANS. THIS FACT HAS MADE IT EASIER TO COMBAT THE DISEASE BECAUSE A SIMPLE VACCINATION WILL PROVIDE PROTECTION TO THOSE WHO MAY BE EXPOSED TO A SMALLPOX PATIENT. THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY HAS BEEN TO TRACK DOWN EVERY SMALLPOX PATIENT AND VACCINATE EVERYBODY WHO COULD COME INTO CONTACT WITH HIM.

THE STRATEGY HAS WORKED. ARMED WITH A VERY SIMPLE VACCINATING TOOL DEVELOPED IN THE UNITED STATES, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION DOCTORS JOINED FORCES WITH PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS IN ALL COUNTRIES WHERE SMALLPOX HAD NOT BEEN PREVIOUSLY ARRESTED. GOING FROM VILLAGE TO

VILLAGE, THE TEAMS SOUGHT OUT SMALLPOX VICTIMS AND VACCINATED THEIR NEIGHBORS. AND GRADUALLY, IN ONE COUNTRY AFTER ANOTHER, SMALLPOX DISAPPEARED.

EIGHT MONTHS IS THE LONGEST PERIOD DURING WHICH SMALLPOX HAS REMAINED UNDETECTED IN ANY COUNTRY WHERE IT HAD BEEN PREVIOUSLY COMMON. BUT THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION REQUIRES THREE TIMES THAT PERIOD -- TWO YEARS -- FOR A COUNTRY TO BE FREE OF SMALLPOX BEFORE IT CAN BE CERTIFIED THAT THE DISEASE IN THAT COUNTRY HAS BEEN, INDEED, ERADICATED.

THE LAST KNOWN CASE OF SMALLPOX OCCURED IN OCTOBER 1977 IN SOMALIA. ITS VICTIM -- SINCE THEN RECOVERED -- WAS ON UNVACCINATED YOUNG MAN WHO HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH TWO SMALLPOX PATIENTS. THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION TEAMS ARE NOW ENGAGED IN A THOROUGH SURVEILLANCE OF SOMALIA AND ITS NEIGHBORS TO ENSURE THAT THERE REMAIN NO HIDING PLACE FOR SMALLPOX.

THE SURVEILLANCE EFFORT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA WILL CONTINUE FOR ANOTHER EIGHTEEN MONTHS. IF NO MORE CASE OF SMALLPOX IS FOUND -- AND WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION OFFICIALS ARE CONFIDENT THAT NONE WILL TURN UP -- THEN A GLOBAL COMMISSION OF PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS FROM ALL REGIONS OF THE WORLD WILL CONFIRM AND DECLARE THAT SMALL-POX HAS BEEN ERADICATED.

THE SEVERE FORM OF SMALLPOX, CALLED VARIOLA MAJOR, HAS ALREADY CEASED TO EXIST. ITS LAST CASE HAD OCCURRED IN BANGLADESH IN OCTOBER 1975 AND WAS DECLARED ERADICATED LAST DECEMBER. THE SMALLPOX FOUND LAST OCTOBER IN SOMALIA WAS VARIOLA MINOR, THE MILDER -- NON-LETHAL -- FORM OF THE DISEASE.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S SMALLPOX ERADICATION PROGRAM HAD COST SOME THREE-HUNDRED-MILLION DOLLARS OVER ELEVEN YEARS. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT THE WORLD WILL SAVE NEARLY TWO-THOUSAND-MILLION DOLLARS EVERY YEAR, A SUM NOW SPENT ON SMALLPOX VACCINATION AND THE CARE FOR THE VICTIMS OF THE DISEASE. AND, OF COURSE, NOBODY COULD PLACE A PRICE TAG ON THE HUMAN SUFFERING AND LOSS OF LIFE WHICH WILL NO LONGER THREATEN THE WORLD ONCE SMALLPOX HAS BEEN COMPLETELY WIPED OUT.

JS/PY